

COMMENTARY

AFTER THE STORM

Can de Gaulle End the Algerian War?

RAYMOND ARON

FOR weeks now the entire West has waited on the news from France. As in a suspense film the uncertainty lasted right up to the end, although the next day observers were surprised at their failure to see what, in retrospect, appeared inevitable. The confusion of deeds and actors has added to the fascination. Had General de Gaulle (the hope of Bourguiba, François Mauriac, and certain advocates of a liberal policy in Algeria) suddenly become the man of the extremists, of MM. Soustelle, Bidault, and Sérigny? Had the French army, which since Napoleon Bonaparte's seizure of power in 1799 never initiated a coup d'état, embarked upon a career in which the Spanish army was its predecessor? Was France forced to choose between the Popular Front and fascism? Was General de Gaulle the savior or the gravedigger of the Republic?

Perhaps it is not yet possible to give a

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definite answer to all these questions. The reality itself is confused and contradictory. Let us try to understand what has happened. We do not wish to recount again the history of events which readers have certainly not forgotten, but it is necessary to recall the essential facts, in contrast to the systematically falsified interpretations which a section of the French press is trying to spread.

Formally, Republican legality has been safeguarded; in reality, a military rebellion, begun in Algiers, has forced a government on France. I am not among those who fail to understand the importance of legal camouflage, but I refuse to take part in the sordid comedy by means of which those who call themselves Republicans try to conceal renunciation or surrender. If the Republic does not mean the supremacy of the civil power over the military, it means nothing. The same people who became enthusiastic over the dismissal of General MacArthur by President Truman are now shutting their eyes to the obvious: the generals in Algiers, encouraged by some colonels who were genuine conspirators, and by some groups of the Cagoulard variety, failed in their duty of loyalty. Whatever the outcome of the crisis, their action creates dangers for France's future which are tragically illustrated by the last century of Spanish history.

By May 20 the appeal to de Gaulle had become almost inevitable. Was the Algiers Committee of Public Safety determined to send in the parachutists to attack the Republic? Would a Popular Front have meant either a civil war or, when the bill fell due, the triumph of Communism? Personally I believe that the trial of strength was moral rather than military, although some extremists in Algiers were probably ready to unleash civil war. The generals were too far committed to illegality not to go right to the end. Above all, M. Pflimlin's government had surrendered several days before its leader officially submitted his resignation. Meanwhile General de Gaulle consciously and voluntarily helped to create the situation which indicated him for the part of savior. Neither General Salan nor General Massu had taken the decision to refuse obedience to the legal government when, on May 15, de Gaulle gave his first statement to the press. Attacking the reign of the political parties, justifying the civilian and military rebels of Algiers, he gave new impetus to the movement which at that time seemed about to come to a halt.

The events of May 13 in Algiers were not caused only by the emotion of crowds fearing the advent of a government of "appeasement." There existed in the army and among the civilian population secret organizations, not all of which had the same object, but which had in common a desire to dictate to the Paris government the policy to follow in Algeria. Some of these groups were working for a so-called Government of National Safety with MM. Soustelle, Duchet, and Bidault. Others, more far-sighted, dreamed of an authoritarian regime. Lastly, there were those who were genuinely Gaullists. These plots and conspirators were known to everyone in Algiers and in Paris. M. Lacoste in Algiers, and the Minister of the Interior in Paris, betraying the duties of their office, affected not to take them seriously and thereby inaugurated that attitude of non-resistance which marked the last days of the Fourth Republic. Thus, the men responsible for the attempted assassina-

tion of General Salan last year were never punished. But let us not exaggerate the importance of these new Cagoulaards. M. Lacoste himself used the threat of rebellion to forbid any change of policy in Paris. He prepared the later events by allowing the preparations to continue, and by announcing the explosion for the day of his departure, May 9. Moreover, he put himself out of the game by refusing to be at his post on D-day, either to suppress the demonstrations or to join the rebellion. In France itself the dissidents were capable of creating some disturbances, not of seizing power by force. But was the Paris government still capable of making itself obeyed, or determined to defend itself?

A strange question. Whatever a regime may be, is it ever ready to abdicate without a fight? However, everything went on as if those who made themselves out to be the Republic's defenders feared a fight more than defeat. Neither General Salan nor even General Massu wished to commit a clear violation of their oaths. They played a double game, giving pledges at the same time to the revolutionaries in Algiers and to the Paris government. They crossed their Rubicon only after General de Gaulle's May 15 communiqué; then, from the moment of M. Soustelle's arrival, the dialectic of the Algerian revolution carried them beyond the frontiers of legality. By then, moreover, the actions (or rather inactions) of M. Pflimlin's government had given them every assurance of the outcome of the adventure.

THE Algiers Committee of Public Safety emerged from a mass movement which was partly spontaneous and partly manipulated. The Committee itself brought together civilians and soldiers, generals and colonels, revolutionaries and reformers, those who only wanted a parliamentary government faithful to the password "French Algeria," and those who, taking advantage of the crisis, wanted to put an end to the "party regime." On May 14, the Pflimlin government, invested by a comfortable majority, seemed to have every chance of winning. Nobody had

moved in France, and in Algiers the generals were making embarrassed statements and indicating a retreat toward legality. On that day the government was not wrong to keep up the semi-fiction that the generals, acting on orders from Paris, were the depositaries of the powers of the Republic. After General de Gaulle's communiqué of May 15, the same tactics took on an opposite meaning. If the Paris government did not force the generals to choose, immediately and openly, between rebellion and obedience, time was inevitably against it. The new order in Algiers became more and more revolutionary; the generals, more and more compromised, could no longer, for personal as much as for political reasons, fall back into the ranks. The split between Algeria and France was unbearable from a long-term point of view, and the Paris government had no means of overcoming it. Having legalized the coup d'état and restored communications between Metropolitan France and Algeria, it had laid down its only two weapons, the one material, the other moral.

It would be unjust to accuse individuals. Certainly, M. Pflimlin scarcely resembled the image of himself suggested by his physical appearance: he is neither icy nor inflexible nor even determined. An honest man, he was quickly left behind by events. Face to face with the revolutionaries of Algiers, who did not shrink from the blackmail of civil war, he recoiled at the risks which resistance would involve. In all probability he recoiled because he himself did not believe in the regime. In this he resembled the majority of his parliamentary colleagues. For some months I had been struck by the defeatism of the members of parliament whom I met. All, whether they were Socialists or Independents (conservatives), announced resignedly that some day the parachutists would come to close the Palais-Bourbon. They regretted it in advance; none of them, or almost none, contemplated opposing it.

States of mind in politics are at once obvious and mysterious. Why this premature abdication? The first reply which comes

to mind is that the parliamentarians were not unaware of their own unpopularity. The great schism between Communists and Socialists reduced the support which the regime could hope for from the masses of the working class. The nationalist intoxication, tinged with xenophobia, which for some months had been displayed in the press, in parliament, and in the streets, gave new life to the eternal temptation of the French rightists: the scorn of parliamentary institutions, the myth of a strong state. Thus M. Bidault was ready to sacrifice the Republic in order to save Algeria, unconscious of the danger of losing both. This unpopularity, it will be said, was deserved: it is not to be borne that, at so grave a moment, a great country should remain three months a year without a government. Nobody could justify the regime of the Fourth Republic as it had worked since the 1956 elections, or even since 1946. Yet it is necessary to make a distinction between the constant weaknesses of French parliamentarianism, and the causes of the present crisis.

IN JANUARY 1956 an Assembly was elected in which the number of deputies "outside the game" amounted to nearly two hundred (the one hundred fifty Communists and some fifty Poujadists). There remained hardly four hundred deputies to form a majority. That majority therefore had to include Socialists and Independents. The extreme parties, hostile to the regime, only allowed the existence of one possible majority, which was itself heterogeneous and torn by contradictions. Changes of ministry thus became more numerous and more shocking, since the majority remained the same and the quality of governments lowered from crisis to crisis.

This parliamentary situation, which demanded an electoral reform and new elections, would probably not have been tragic if it had not coincided with the Algerian war. It was easy for the opponents of the regime, even for Republicans in search of an alibi, to blame the "party system" for the prolongation of the war. For two years the

press, incapable of explaining why an army of 400,000 men did not make an end of those who were presented as a collection of murderers, had incriminated in turn Tunisia, the United States, Great Britain, "decadent intellectuals," and the regime. None of these accusations was without some foundation. Tunisia helped the Algerian nationalists to the best of her ability. Neither public opinion nor the governing quarters of Great Britain and the United States believed in the success of pacification: this skepticism strengthened the FLN rebels in their will to fight to the end. The opponents of M. Lacoste in France (I was one of them) gave the FLN the hope that one day France's determination would weaken. Her leaders did not succeed in convincing her enemies and the world that they really wanted what they said they wanted. To be convincing, they would have had to be convinced themselves; but their private conversations gave the lie to their solemn declarations.

Yet whatever the portion of truth that may be accorded to these arguments, as a whole they failed to take into account the essential fact: it was in Algeria, not in France, that the decisive game was being played. Nobody could say with certainty what percentage of the Algerian population was favorable to the FLN, what percentage was favorable to France, how many were decided to "wait and see." What is certain is that the nationalists represented a young, enthusiastic, passionate fraction of the Algerian people. Supplied from outside, in a huge country, broken and difficult of access, recruiting fighting men by terror or persuasion among the hundreds of thousands of unemployed, they were obviously not in a position to defeat the French army. But was the army in a position to restore peace, that is, either to exterminate the rebels or to attract the support of the mass of the population? The parliamentarians hesitated to give a reply, but the majority doubted whether total military victory was possible. Lacking such a victory, political means had to intervene to complete the task. But two obstacles appeared in the way: the intran-

sigence of the FLN, and the fears of the Algerian French. It is easy, in the calm of a newspaper office, to write that negotiation alone offers a way out. But is negotiation possible without offering the right to independence, if not independence itself? And what French government could use that word, which was perhaps indispensable for negotiation with the FLN?

It will be said that, in the absence of negotiations, reforms of a liberal character could have been offered. Yes, it would have been better had the "framework law" voted early in 1958 been clear, and had it received massive support from the Assembly. But in any case it would not have satisfied the FLN. Perhaps it would have attracted the support of the moderate nationalists who are holding aloof today, but the war would have gone on. So the deputies felt confusedly that they could neither prolong, nor end, nor win the Algerian war. Once more, like their predecessors in July 1940, many of them longed in the depth of their hearts to pass on to some wonder-working personality the responsibility which they had no longer the strength to bear: a comparison which would be unjust if one did not add that the "Man of Destiny" restored the Republic twelve years ago, and then withdrew.

The hypothesis of a Roman dictatorship—that is, of power almost absolute, but legal and temporary—is not excluded. Like the full powers asked for by General de Gaulle, the Roman dictatorship used to last six months.

FOREIGN observers have been impressed by the calm of the French people throughout the storm. Apathy, indifference, loyalty to institutions—every explanation has been suggested. Personally, I am struck by the unchanging quality of the French political temperament, as it has been demonstrated in the course of the crisis.

France wavers between regimes of entire anonymity, when Frenchmen hardly know the name of their Prime Minister, and fits of enthusiasm for a leader indicated by his fame, his age, or the circumstances. It is as

though the plebiscitary element, normally integrated into democratic institutions, were repressed in France during periods of calm, to explode the more violently when circumstances are propitious. At the moment probably, General de Gaulle would get 60 to 70 per cent of the votes if he asked for investiture at the hands of the ordinary citizen. He would not have got 20 per cent three months ago! How many will he keep in three months' time?

The parliamentary regime still does not enjoy the undisputed legitimacy which it has in the United States and Great Britain. Every time the divided country faces a major ordeal the regime is questioned, and men dream of constitutional reform. France has not yet overcome the precariousness of her institutions, which was noted and deplored in the last century by her political writers. On the other hand, it must be remembered that the subversive movement was unleashed by small clandestine groups, which received the support of the army owing to a colonial situation that created an inevitable solidarity between the French of Algeria and the officers and men from Metropolitan France. General de Gaulle himself, after having used the Algiers threat as a means of pressure, showed himself respectful of the forms and got together a cabinet which, apart from two of his old "companions" (MM. Debré and Malraux) and some bureaucrats, resembles the cabinets of the Fourth Republic. It is as though the "savior" had forced the regime to surrender, but in order to reform it, not destroy it.

It is needless to sketch once again this man's portrait in detail. Proud and solitary, great, but terribly conscious of his greatness, the General has wanted to assume the Republic's powers, not from vulgar ambition, but from a certainty that he and he alone was capable of saving the country. An ambition which, so to speak, transcends the personal, since it scorns the fruits of power and aims less at honors than at "the fame which is not shared." Today, at the age of sixty-seven, General de Gaulle states, with obvious sincerity, that once peace is restored in

Algeria and the constitution is reformed, he will return to end his days at Colombey. But the future belongs to no one, and the forces unleashed by the storm will perhaps obstruct this plan to emulate Cincinnatus or Washington.

For two years France has had Algiers for capital. The surrender of the Paris government dates from February 6, 1956 (when M. Mollet capitulated to the settlers). The whole question is to know whether the Algiers coup d'état, which formally marks a new stage in France's submission to the Algerian French, will not bring about a dialectical reversal. May not General de Gaulle give back autonomy to the French state, henceforth symbolized by his own person? The answer depends above all, and almost solely, on what de Gaulle undertakes in Algeria. If he prolongs the previous policy, if he ratifies the decision—taken in a moment of enthusiasm—to aim at integration, he will find himself in a few months from now—and France with him—in a much worse state than before the storm. If he applies the ideas which those who have been in contact with him during the last two years (and during the crisis itself) attribute to him, an almost miraculous opportunity of salvation will be offered to France and the West.

INTEGRATION, in the form in which M. Soustelle has tried to recommend it, is impractical. If Algerian men and women have the representatives in parliament to which the proportional rule entitles them, they will soon have more than a hundred; in twenty years, with the present growth of the Algerian population (250,000 a year), they would occupy a quarter or more of the seats in the Assembly. Economically, the reduction of the differences in living standards between Algeria and Metropolitan France would mean sacrifices which the French would no longer accept once they felt their consequences. From a human point of view, integration would not take away from Moslems of French culture the desire to assert the personality of Algeria: after all, the assimilated Algerians, the students,

are in the vanguard of the nationalist movement, because it is they, more than the masses, who are humiliated by the French. In truth, those who proclaim the password of integration, whether they know it or not, can only want an enrollment of the type carried out by the army in a part of Algeria. This kind of integration is colonialist or fascist. If the army wishes to impose this policy, it will also have to impose a fascist regime in France. To imagine one hundred Algerian deputies in the Palais-Bourbon is lunatic. To imagine France without a parliament unhappily is not.

The other way is that which General de Gaulle has always suggested as the one he wished to take: association. The formula of a Franco-Algerian federation and confederation with Tunisia and Morocco creates more problems than it solves; it comes very late. The only solution which still offers a chance must be based on two principles: equality of Moslems and French in Algeria, and recognition of the special position of Algeria in relation to the other French departments. At this point two threatening questions appear: will the Algerian French now accept what they have refused for so long? Will the FLN renounce its immediate and extreme claims? Or, at least, if it continues the struggle, will it be deserted by its troops and by the masses? For some weeks General de Gaulle will have the chance to serve France such as no Frenchman has had before him, and which none will have for a long time to come. Never has so much been entrusted to one man.

IT WOULD be easy to evoke the dangers threatening: the Communists have come out of their isolation, and an imposing section on the left is ready to join them tomorrow to "restore the Republic." Certain people in Algiers, civilians and soldiers alike, want to enlarge the breach they have made in the fortress of the Republic. For some weeks, contentment will reign. A free delay of execution is always granted to "men of destiny"; sometimes it is dearly paid for. But why continue? Frenchmen are no blinder than others, and they know what (during the Great Revolution) followed the days of fraternization, the festival of Federation, and the trees of Liberty. But a Frenchman may surely be pardoned for not losing hope. For, if General de Gaulle fails, if the Algerian war continues, if passions are unleashed, if events follow their catastrophic course, if tomorrow France must choose between the Communist party and the regime heralded by Algiers Radio, then millions of Frenchmen will watch their country's ruin with torn hearts.

Since the war, in spite of parliamentary imbecilities and colonial follies, the nation has begun a profound economic, demographic, and spiritual renaissance. All the elements necessary for an honorable period of French history are present. There is but one condition: that France accept the world as it is, that she take her place in it, and prefer reason to myths. We know that the friendship of her allies will not fail her: in the months to come more will be at stake than the fate of France alone.